After finishing second in the state last year, the men’s tennis team has nearly every member back for 2012 and is geared up to make another run for the state title.

Winning its first three matches of this season in impressive fashion, the team has shown it is motivated to avenge last year’s state finals loss to Cardinal Gibbons High School. The team has been working hard, practicing two hours every day it doesn’t have a match.

“In tennis there is no off-season,” said junior Nick Russo, a player who has stepped into a more significant role on the varsity squad this season.

Those early victories displayed the depth of the Cougars’ talent, since number one player Kyle Johnson was still recovering from a knee injury suffered during a church league basketball game in January. The injury forced the other members of the team to play one spot above their normal positions, but the Cougars were able to adjust and compete well.

Senior Matt Martinez successfully filled the number one slot for the squad during Johnson’s absence, and the addition of junior Collin Wohlfert, a new student to Charlotte Catholic, has given the team a huge boost. Seniors William Clementi and Zach Satchee return to the squad, and juniors Russo and Forrest Boone have both cracked the varsity lineup this year. This combination of experience and talent has the team confident that it can compete with the best teams in the state.

“Overall, I expect that this is going to be a good year for us, and hopefully we’ll claim the title,” said Russo.

In addition to skilled players, the team also benefits from the leadership of its coach, Mr. Hazen. He was named the North Carolina Tennis Association coach of the year in 2011, and under his leadership Catholic has won 24 conference championships, including 21 in a row. Mr. Hazen was also named the Mega-7 coach of the year last year, an award he earned by leading the team to 144 conference wins in a row, a streak that dates back to 1990. These accolades plus the five state championships that Mr. Hazen has won illustrate the effect of his leadership on the team’s success.

“We have a great, great coach in Mr. Hazen. He recently won an award from the NCTA, and he always has good words of encouragement and advice,” said Russo.

The team’s only two losses so far this season have been to Ardrey Kell and Providence, both schools that are a division above Charlotte Catholic and that are ranked in the top five in the state for their division. Despite this, the Cougars were able to play them tough, which should bode well for the team as its level of competition intensifies over the duration of the season.